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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001858

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS

NSC FOR E. MILLARD

LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

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SUBJECT: To ease cohabitation tensions, president and PM Wickremesinghe agree to "joint" meetings

Refs: Colombo 1848, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador E. Ashley Wills. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) Summary: The Ambassador met Minister Milinda Moragoda and Norwegian Ambassador Westborg on October 5. In a wide-ranging discussion, Moragoda reviewed his recent meeting with President Kumaratunga, and said the two sides had agreed to hold regular high-level discussions on peace process and national security issues. Re dealings with the Tamil Tigers, Westborg commented that the GSL was probably wise to focus on small, meliorative steps and not structural "big picture" matters that could prove controversial at this stage. While the news re "joint" meetings was positive, it is hard to be optimistic about this latest effort to bridge the cohabitation divide. End Summary.

Moragoda reviews meeting with Kumaratunga

2. (C) The Ambassador, DCM, and polchief met October 5 with Milinda Moragoda, a minister and key player for the GSL on peace process issues, and Norwegian Ambassador Jon Westborg. Moragoda, when he was not on his cell phone with the prime minister, reviewed his October 4 meeting with President Kumaratunga and former Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, a key adviser. Much of the two-and-a-half hour meeting with the president was taken up with what Moragoda called "a history lesson," as Kumaratunga reviewed how cohabitation ties had reached their currently parlous state. Moragoda stressed that he had tried hard to understand Kumaratunga's litany of complaints, but admitted he had difficulty making sense of it all.

3. (C) (((Note: Moragoda said Kumaratunga had repeated her long-standing complaint that her son had not been admitted to a well-known local high school some 15 years ago when PM Wickremesinghe was Education Minister. In doing this, she apparently did not repeat her controversial public charge last week that Wickremesinghe and his staff had demanded a bribe in exchange for support for her son's application -- see Reftel. Also see Westborg's comments below re another of the president's complaints, e.g., that the GSL should allow her to have a representative on its peace negotiation team. End Note.)))

Two Sides agree to "Joint" meetings

4. (C) Despite the complaints from Kumaratunga, Moragoda indicated that the meeting turned out to be productive. After obtaining the prime minister's approval, Moragoda related that he had proposed that the two sides hold regular "joint" meetings to discuss peace process and national security issues. The president had accepted the offer. Reviewing the proposal with Ambassador Wills, Moragoda related that he would join with the PM and Defense Minister Marapana to form the GSL team, while the president would be accompanied by Kadirgamar and one other (as yet unnamed) adviser. It was not clear how often the meetings would be held, but Moragoda indicated that he was thinking they would take place every couple of weeks, and before and after the upcoming rounds of talks with the Tamil Tigers.

5. (C) Ambassador Wills commented that the idea of holding the joint meetings was a positive development, which perhaps would lead to a long-term cooling down in tensions between the two sides. In response, Moragoda said he sincerely hoped that it worked. There were still outstanding tensions on other issues, however. He noted that the GSL continued to pursue parliamentary agreement on a proposed constitutional amendment that

would rein in the president's powers to call new elections and allow crossover voting. Sri Lanka's Supreme Court was examining various petitions related to the government's proposed bill at this time. Depending on how the Supreme Court handles the many petitions, including one that demands a popular referendum on the amendment, an up-or-down vote might take place in Parliament sometime in the next several weeks. It was still up in the air whether the government had the two-thirds support necessary to win the vote, according to Moragoda. The GSL had the support of the Tamil parties, but it was not yet clear whether enough members of the president's People's Alliance party intended to defect.

Dealing with the Tigers

16. (C) Switching focus, the conversation turned to the status of the peace process. Moragoda noted that the GSL was working hard to gain the release of six Sri Lankan soldiers held by the Tamil Tigers in Trincomalee District. (Note: The Tigers released one of the soldiers last week. The other six soldiers have been detained since September 25 -- see Reftels.) The Tigers were driving a hard bargain, demanding the release of two of their cadre held by the GSL. The government hoped to resolve the issue and was putting pressure on the judiciary to give bail to the two LTTE cadre. In any case, tensions in the east were hot over the issue and many roads in Trincomalee had been closed down by a strike on October 4. In other parts of the east, Muslims were upset over Tiger activities, as well as other issues.

17. (C) ((Note: Moragoda noted that he planned to visit Trincomalee on October 6 to check on the problems there. In an October 7 meeting with the Ambassador, General Balagalle, the Army chief, said he had accompanied Moragoda on his trip to Trincomalee. He said Moragoda had faced harsh questions about the soldiers' situation from many Sinhalese. Moragoda had handled himself well, the general remarked, but there was a lot of tension in the air. End Note.)))

18. (C) Ambassador Wills asked Westborg about Tiger spokesman Anton Balasingham's recent comments made after the mid-September talks in Thailand that seemed to edge away from separatism. Westborg replied that Balasingham and the Tigers now seemed to support the idea of achieving regional autonomy (as opposed to outright independence) via negotiations. In any case, the government seems to be making a wise choice in not pressing the Tigers for agreement on wide-ranging constitutional issues at this time, Westborg remarked. These issues made the Tigers uncomfortable and would force them to define their terms, which was something the group did not want to do at this stage in the negotiations. In its past discussions with the Tigers over the course of many years, the government had always pressed the group on complex "big picture" constitutional proposals re regional devolution and the like. The Tigers had been scarred away. Better for the GSL to proceed as it is by gaining agreement first on smaller, practical issues, such as the lifting of restrictions on travel and other confidence-building measures.

19. (C) The Ambassador also asked Westborg about the president's request to attach a representative to the government's peace negotiation team. Westborg said this idea would only work out if both the president and the PM made the choice of who the representative would be. There was no way the Tigers would accept working with a person who was identified as the president's representative alone. The group did not trust her. They felt that she was surrounded by Sinhalese extremists, and it was an unfortunate fact of the peace process that the Tigers often acted emotionally and irrationally to any hint of Sinhalese chauvinism emanating from the south.

10. (C) ((Note: Although Westborg did not explicitly mention it, it is well-known that the Tigers will not sit down in any room with former Foreign Minister Kadirgamar, who is otherwise a logical choice for any presidential appointment to the negotiating team. As Kadirgamar is Tamil, the Tigers consider him to be a traitor to their cause. Westborg did note that Kadirgamar, beyond his sometimes hard-edged stance re the peace process, had revealed himself to be deeply committed to the plight of Tamils, feeling that the community had indeed suffered severe persecution at the hands of the Sinhalese. End Note.)))

Comment

11. (C) The news that the two sides have agreed to "joint" meetings is constructive. That said, it is hard to be optimistic about this latest effort to bridge the cohabitation divide. Our assessment is that the tensions between the two sides are so endemic and so personalized at this point that we do not see them going away anytime soon. The ongoing debate over the proposed bill limiting her powers could prove the catalyst for renewed cohabitation combat, for example.

12. (C) Moragoda deserves praise for winning the president's agreement to the proposal involving regular meetings with the PM. He really seems to understand the need to cool down tensions to the extent possible for the sake of the peace process. (Note: He also seems a good choice as interlocutor with Kumaratunga. In one of those rare asides in which you briefly glimpse the "real" Sri Lanka, Moragoda told the Ambassador that he shared a caste background with Kumaratunga, a fact which she had told him was important to her. Both his grandfather and Kumaratunga's slain husband were members of the "Durawe," a caste traditionally involved in "toddy tapping," the first step in brewing a popular alcoholic beverage called arrack. Such is the stuff of better cohabitation ties!)

13. (C) With respect to the peace process, Westborg's comments that the government should continue its current focus on small, meliorative steps were perceptive. The Tigers seem to be reacting well to the government's current policy of moving toward what we call a "sloppy solution" in which the two sides build up trust over a long period through an established pattern of confidence-building measures. As Westborg has noted, past peace processes have been literally blown apart by GSL efforts to get the Tiger's to agree first (and on the dotted line) to "big picture" structural issues, such as what the north and east might look like down the road following a peace accord. End Comment.

14. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS